Probers Doubt Kennedy Knew

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Senate intelligence investigators pursued a bizarre White House episode which raised the possibility — now fully discounted — that President Kennedy may have learned of CIA plans to poison Fidel Castro from a woman friend of top underworld figures.

The highly sensitive investigation by the Senate intelligence committee will be alluded to briefly in the report on the CIA's involvement in plans to assassinate foreign leaders. The report is scheduled for release Thursday.

The investigation centered on a 1960 Kennedy campaign volunteer, then known as Judith Campbell, who became the subject of top-priority concern to the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover because of her association with crime figures John Roselli and the late Sam Giancana. Both men were involved in the CIA's plot to poison Castro.

Campbell's role in the episode was heightened by the fact that she frequently telephoned the Kennedy White House. Investigators found evidence of some 70 phone calls from her during an 11-month period in the log of former presidential secretary Evelyn Lincoln on file in the Kennedy Library.

Lincoln told the Senate intelligence committee that Campbell was a volunteer in the California campaign and had met the President there. She said she could not recall that the former campaign worker ever visited the President in the White House or elsewhere after the 1960 election.

Campbell gave the committee a deposition saying that she never know of the poison plot from Giancana, Roselli or anyone else. From the standpoint of the investigation into assassination schemes directed against foreign leaders this meant the entire Campbell episode was irrelevant to the committee's inquiry.

"We were not investigating President Kennedy's personal associations," said one ranking member of the investigating panel.

Campbell's calls to the White House — usually logged into Lincoln's office — began on March 29, 1961, from the caller's Los Angeles residence. Many were described in the investigative files of the staff as "Campbell-JFK calls."

The files indicate that several of Campbell's calls to the White House were made from the Oak Park, Ill., residence of Giancana. At times, however, she would call from the Mayflower Hotel in Washington.

FBI Director Hoover, who was aware of the CIA's involvement with Giancana in anti-Castro operations, sent memos in February, 1962, to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and White House chief of staff Kenneth O'Donnell alerting them to the

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potentially embarrassing range of Campbell's social acquaintances.

Hoover then submitted a memo on Campbell directly to President Kennedy and met with him for lunch on March 22, 1962. There is no record of the discussion. Close former aides to the President recall no mention of it.

Lincoln said she also received a copy of the first memo and at that point Campbell's calls were no longer accepted at the White House.

The committee decided unanimously to take a low-key approach to the Campbell episode, some members feeling that it would be more appropriate to ignore it as irrelevant to presidential awareness of the Castro assassination schemes.

"We decided to allude to it in order to avoid any suggestion that we were playing favorites with some administrations," said one well-informed committee source.

Senate intelligence committee staff logs which came into the possession of The Washington Post indicate that Hoover sent a memo to then CIA Deputy Director for Plans (covert operations) Richard Bissell on Oct. 18, 1960, recording his awareness of Giancana's involvement in the Castro poison plot.

By January, 1961, Bissell was discussing an "executive action" — believed to be the Castro assassination plan — with two other high-level CIA officials. They were Sidney Gottlieb, who became chief of the technical services division in charge of the agency's drug experimentation program, and William Harvey, a senior case officer for underworld recruits.

The same month Bissell is recorded as having briefed McGeorge Bundy, then the President's national security affairs adviser, on the executive action.

Also in January, 1961, the new President began receiving intensive briefings from then CIA Director Allen Dulles on the Bay of Pigs invasion plan.

That month of the Kennedy inauguration the new Attorney General undertook a coordinated investigation by federal and local agencies into the affairs of Giancana, who the CIA had recruited for the attempt on Castro's life.

It could not be determined when Attorney General Kennedy first became aware of Giancana's dual role as a target of domestic criminal prosecution and an espionage agent in the pay of the U.S.

But by April, 1961 — days prior to the Bay of Pigs fiasco — there is evidence in the committee's files that the transmission of the poison materials toward its intended political target had begun.

Nonetheless, the committee could not determine whether President Kennedy ever learned of the CIA's recruitment of underworld figures, who were interested in re-establishing their bases in Havana, for the assassination attempt against Castro.